Book review,

“Mass Housing in Europe: Multiple Faces of Development, Change and Response”


Most authors and studies on mass housing generally focus on problems in post-World War II-estates, with a tendency for uniform cross-national analysis and generalised policy recommendations, and often preferring physical and managerial interventions. Contrastingly, this book does not focus on the similarities of mass housing, but takes the variation between housing estates and different local contexts as its core theme. The book focuses on developments over time and tries to understand these changes. This approach is both a strength and a weakness. Studies generalising from case study material can usually conclude that their ‘local’ findings are sound, but cannot be transferred because they are framed by contextual factors. That said, the purpose of academic research is to make local conclusions available for broader use by analysing to what extent findings are influenced by contextual factors.

Why are mass housing estates a problem? One obvious reason is that they provide – en masse – a housing type that does not reflect contemporary individual preferences. The authors are reluctant to blame the physical layout of mass housing estates. They embrace the stance that the popularity of dwellings is important, but the authors also fear the premature demolition of estates. Rather than demolish large housing estates, the authors argue that it might be better to first look for households that would be willing to live in these areas.

The authors warn of a too narrow focus on physical issues as the primary determinant of the residents’ quality of life and housing satisfaction. They do this by stating that there are many large housing estates with satisfied residents, who do not want to move as soon as possible. Here again they focus on differences between mass housing estates, pointing at differences in satisfaction. In mainstream research the prospering estates get considerably less attention than the blighted ones.

This edited volume covers 11 chapters, divided into three parts. The authors take care to connect the separate chapters to each other, which makes the book a pleasant read as one integrated volume. The chapters each contribute to the overall theme of the book.

The early chapters provide an introduction and an overview of theories on how neighbourhoods and estates have developed over time. Chapters addressing five key issues of large housing estates form the core of the book. These issues are: resident satisfaction, social mix, public spaces, social cohesion and resident participation. Public spaces are a particular topical issue for large housing estates. Evidently,
many public spaces have not developed as was originally envisioned. Increasingly public spaces are becoming areas of conflict between residents, especially between old and new arrivals. Residents consider the many green areas as a major asset, and simultaneously as a major source of problems. The authors of Chapter 6 argue in favour of smaller but higher-quality public spaces, preferably designed and managed with the active involvement of residents.

The final part of the book addresses aspects of policy and participation. The authors here end on a philosophical note. Although only a limited number of housing estates are in need of major improvements, many estates have undergone radical transformation. These estates have changed from a living environment that people at one time queued up for, into an environment that many residents consider a first or temporary step in their housing career. This is, however, not necessarily a bad thing, the authors state, as these estates fulfil a necessary position on the local housing market. As people’s lives are getting more volatile, flexible housing solutions are needed. Large housing estates could cater for this need. However, as the authors mention, mass housing estates are still vulnerable, as result of large concentrations of households with a relative weak socio-economic position.

After reading the book, the impact of the physical appearance of mass housing estates still largely remains an unanswered question. The daunting scale and repetitiousness of large post World War II housing estates are not denied by the authors, but their detrimental impact is. The authors raise the question: what would have happened if post-war areas hadn’t been developed as mass housing estates, but with other forms of accommodation? They argue that other housing forms would have experienced similar problems, so the building form is not necessarily the cause of the problem. This is rather hypothetical and not their strongest argument. It could be argued for any housing form; is it the building type or is it scale?

The focus on differences and local contexts has its consequences for the transferability of the findings. The authors of Chapter 8, for example, challenge the idea of convergence, and are sceptical about the possibility of policy transfer. Success or failure is always, at least partially, determined by contextual factors and local features. Mass-housing blocks might seem to be similar, but viable solutions are often different.

Despite their focus on local contexts, the authors do make some generalisations by distinguishing between three regional groups in some of the book chapters: estates in western Europe (more problematic, more movers, more marginalised, bad image) are different from southern estates (more stable, more urban life) and eastern European estates (sudden privatisations, poor quality, energetic problems). Results and conclusions are assembled according to these three groups. This sometimes leads to rather obvious conclusions: it is not very surprising that large housing estates in Bucharest or Budapest, differ from those in Barcelona or Bari, or from Birmingham or Bremen. A discussion on different outcomes within each of the three regional groups would have been much more interesting to the reader. In summary, the book offers a valuable insight into the differences and similarities between large housing estates across Europe. It illustrates that any viable approach
should start by looking carefully into the local situation, and that any development may work out differently in another context. However, the argument of differentiation is stressed too far, while transferability could have been stressed more. The book deals with some key issues that are of general value. The book is a pleasant read and is logically structured, forming part of the new generation of mass housing literature.

Frank Wassenberg
Nicis Institute, The Hague and OTB Research Institute
Delft University of Technology, Delft
The Netherlands